

The Guilt-Free Life (Integrity - Chapter 4)

Ready:

I always do my best to have a clear conscience toward God and men.

Acts 24:16

Set

Wendy Ward doesn't know how it happened. All that matters is that she knows it did. She didn't see her golf ball move, but when she realized that her putt no longer lined up, it was clear that the ball had rotated a mere "dimple or two." Ward had already grounded her putter, and she immediately knew that the sometimes unforgiving rules of the game were about to cost her a stroke.

But this wasn't just another average day at an average LPGA tournament. Ward was in the final group playing in the fourth and final round of the 2000 McDonald's LPGA Championship at the DuPont Country Club in Wilmington, Delaware. She had entered the day in a tie for the lead with legendary golfer Juli Inkster.

And there Ward stood on the green of the par-3 thirteenth hole, shaking her head at what had just occurred. But one thing that never crossed her mind was the possibility that no one else had seen what she had seen. Strangely enough, Ward would later learn that no one else had seen that the ball had moved, and she very well could have played on without penalty.

"There wasn't a decision," Ward remembers. "It was just a reaction. I didn't weigh the costs of whether or not I'd ever be in that position again for a major championship."

For Ward, her choice to follow the letter of golf's stringent law wasn't something that had just happened. The determination to say yes to integrity—hence turning away from the temptation to cheat—had been instilled in her character years earlier as a young girl being raised in San Antonio, Texas. Ward's father was a military man and subsequently lived by a strict honor code. Her mother was equally dedicated to showing their children a strong example of biblical morality.

"My folks strike me as the biggest example [of integrity]—from a simple lesson of telling the truth," Ward says. "They taught me that you can hold true to your commitments and be honest about them, but you don't need to make excuses and go do something else. They always set that example of being honest with us and being honest with other people. There was no other option to telling the truth."

By the time Ward was seven years old, she was on her way to major success on the golf course. Her family would play together on the weekends—even on Sundays, immediately

following their church's early service. And the lessons that she learned in her home always found a way into a game that also has a long-standing tradition of integrity and honesty.

"If I wasn't playing with my family on Saturdays or Sundays, I would be out on the golf course by myself," Ward says. "I would play two balls, and I'd play one against the other; and there wasn't any cheating. I was just a very competitive person by nature. I guess in my household, rules were rules, and they weren't meant to be broken. There was a reason that they were in place, and I just respected that."

Despite attending church, reading parts of the Bible and knowing the story of Jesus, Ward had not taken that necessary step of making Him the Lord of her life. In the meantime, Ward was having a hugely successful amateur golf career, including winning the 1992 Texas State Women's title. She then left home to play for the perennial women's golf powerhouse at Arizona State University, where she was part of three NCAA championship teams (1993-95) and individually finished as the runner-up twice and in third place one time. Ward was also a three-time First Team All-American.

But during her sophomore year, Ward says she found herself struggling with college life in general. Her grades weren't as good as she wanted them to be, and her attitude toward golf was also taking a sharp turn in the wrong direction. Ward recalls one day talking on the phone to her golf instructor, Lori Brock, who had likewise noticed the negative changes in her pupil and asked if she had ever thought about attending ASU's Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings.

"It's funny, because it's one of those critical moments where if your folks told you that, you probably would have closed the door," Ward says. "If my college coach would have said something, I would have been defensive. But because I had this admiration for my instructor, I said, 'You know, I'll check into that.'"

Ward approached Arizona State's head coach, Linda Vollstedt, and had already assumed she would say no because of a conflict between when FCA met and study hall. But without missing a beat, Vollstedt gave her star golfer permission to add the ministry to her college experience.

Ward likens her first FCA experience to "going to a new school." Even though the room was full of athletes, she didn't know any of them personally. But Ward was attracted to the environment created by the music that was already playing when she walked through the door. She had grown up in a church where her dad played the organ, and both of her parents were in the choir. Ward herself enjoys playing piano and was surprised to see one of the coaches playing guitar and leading the group in worship choruses.

"All of the sudden, the music mellowed me out," Ward says. "Any chip on my shoulder I might have had, I left at the door. They were singing songs that I didn't even know, and I was kind of getting into them. It was just that warm fuzzy feeling. You don't know where it's coming from, but it's something good. When I walked out of that room, I had this warm fuzzy feeling . . . but I also had this great feeling of jealousy. The reason I call it great is because I said, *These people have something I don't have. And I want it.* I went to my dorm and I was just overwhelmed, and I feel like that's when I truly accepted Christ as my Savior."

From that point on, things immediately began to change for Ward. Her attitude took a drastic turn for the better, and that played a significant role in the improvement of her performances

on the golf course and in the classroom. Ward also says it was her newfound relationship with God that helped her understand the why behind her parents' faithful commitment to integrity.

"It comes at that point where you make a commitment to follow and walk with Christ," Ward says. "Then you basically start reading the Word and find out things that you must uphold to call yourself a Christian. I don't want to bring shame to His name, because I'm placed on Earth only to glorify His name. Anything short of that is displeasing to Him."

After graduating from Arizona State in 1995 with a degree in business management, Ward turned professional that summer and competed in four LPGA events. She qualified for the tour on her first try and debuted as a rookie in the 1996 season. A year later, she won her first tournament by topping the field at the 1997 Fieldcrest Cannon Classic. Ward's sudden-death playoff victory at the 1998 Cup Noodles Hawaiian Ladies Open not only gave her a second career title but also solidified her standing as one of the rising stars on the tour.

But as Ward took the thirteenth green on the final day of the 2000 LPGA Championship, she was looking to break a drought that was nearing two years in length. As she stared down at that displaced golf ball, the ramification of what taking an extra stroke might have on her chances of winning was the furthest thing from her mind.

"When that ball moved, I didn't think twice," Ward says. "In fact, when I saw it move, I thought the whole world saw it. When you're in the last group on Sunday, the cameras are rolling, and the gallery is around the green. I stepped back and thought, *You've got to be kidding me*. I remember looking up to my playing partner and good friend Juli Inkster and she looks at me and she's like, 'What?' And I said, 'The ball moved. Did you see it?' And she's like, 'No.' It never crossed my mind, *Oh, I wonder if anybody else saw it*. I automatically thought the whole world had seen it. I don't know if that's your conscience. I didn't think of the consequences. I didn't think about how it was going to make me look. I come to look at it now and see that it was the closest that I ever got to winning a major, and yet the platform that God put me on was so much greater."

At the end of the day, Ward can't say for sure that the stroke cost her the tournament, but it is clear that doing the right thing cost her a shot at the resulting playoff. Instead, Ward—who finished in a tie for third place—watched from the clubhouse to see the final result. What happened after that was a remarkable moment that completely took Ward by surprise.

"Juli Inkster went on to win that tournament, and the top three people have to attend the award ceremony," Ward recalls. "We got up on the green, and she was giving her speech, and she said, 'I'd love to stand here and sing praises about how great I played today, but I have to give credit to Wendy because she's the true champion today.' I wasn't expecting that. She was still trying to figure out, 'Are you sure the ball moved?' She felt like she'd been gifted the trophy, and she felt like what I did was more of an example and a victory for the game of golf. To this day, when we stumble across that story, she'll still tell me, 'I don't think that ball moved.' Yet I know it did. I didn't make it move, but that doesn't matter. It's just the rule."

Ward admits that even the kind words by Inkster weren't enough to console her from the heady reality that she had come so close to a major championship.

"I was pretty deflated at the end of the day," Ward admits. "It's funny, because I didn't feel like I lost the tournament due to that one stroke. I felt like I'd lost the tournament because my chipping was horrendous that week. So I was talking to my instructor that evening on the

phone about how my short game had abandoned me, and he kept going back to, 'Are you sure that ball moved?'"

"I wasn't proud that it happened," Ward adds. "I was mad for a time at God for letting it happen. I was like, 'How could You let that ball move?' Then I realized that there was a greater lesson there. It took a few days for it to really sink in what I had given up, or what I had lost. But then what I had truly gained and the reason that I'm out there playing and the concept of the audience of One really came into play for me. We play for an audience of One."

A year later, Ward broke her winless streak by claiming the 2001 Wendy's Championship for Children. Her fourth and most recent tournament victory came in 2005 at the LPGA Takefuji Classic. Ward's other achievements since 2000 consist of numerous top 10 finishes and membership on three U.S. Solheim Cup teams—including the championship squad in 2005.

With just over \$3.5 million in career winnings, Ward understands the temptation that some may face when it comes to similar situations such as the one she experienced that day. She estimates that finishing tied for third instead of possibly winning the tournament most likely resulted in a \$120,000 pay cut.

When other golfers are faced with the same choice, Ward has often watched them make the selfish choice that slowly but surely begins to chip away at their integrity.

"It's funny because there have been a few situations where that has happened; and different players have claimed that they didn't ground their putter, yet TV shows that they did," Ward says. "That's when my stomach turns, because it's not the right thing to do. I don't know how somebody could go on, but again it's just a difference in where you stand in your heart and your mind."

Ward has yet to repeat her near-miss championship run from the 2000 season, but the blessings she received from choosing integrity that day have been plentiful—maybe not so much in terms of financial gain or personal accolades, but certainly in the way her stand has touched the lives of those who were watching from a distance.

"The neatest thing was when I would have a dad come up to me at a tournament a month or so later with his little daughter," Ward says, "and he would say, 'Hey, I know you don't want to revisit this, but I told my daughter about what happened a month ago, and she really thinks it is cool that you were that honest. That was a really neat lesson that I got to share with her, and you're her favorite now.' And I got a lot of fan mail about it."

Ward's deep-seated understanding of the importance of integrity, instilled in her by her parents, had been convicted by her years of studying the virtues of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself was once tempted to compromise His integrity, a story that can be found in Matthew 4:1-11. While nearing the end of a 40-day fast in the wilderness, Jesus was approached by Satan who on two separate occasions tried to talk the Son of God into performing miraculous feats in order to prove His divine identity. During a third confrontation, Satan tempted Jesus to bow down to him in exchange for "all the kingdoms of the world" (v. 8).

Every time Satan came to Jesus, the Savior rebuked him by quoting God's Word. There wasn't a long thought-out process. He didn't take time to go and ask a friend for advice. Jesus simply did the right thing, because He knew that even though no man would ever see His actions that day, God in heaven was watching. Jesus was keenly aware of that fact, and the

thought of denying His Father undoubtedly never crossed His mind.

And while Ward admits she has made her fair share of mistakes, one thing that truly gives her joy is the knowledge that when push comes to shove, she knows that she will always do right by her relationship with God when it comes to matters of integrity, honesty and character.

“Our success each year is measured by where you finished on the money list,” Ward explains. “The world creates that scenario and that standard. But God calls us to measure ourselves against His standards, His rules. I try to just play for Him, play for His approval. Can I walk off the course each day knowing, number one, that I gave my best; number two, that I didn’t give up; and, number three, did my actions and attitude uphold everything that I stand for? Will He be pleased with me at the end of the day?”

Go

1. Wendy Ward had the opportunity to cheat but instinctively chose not to do so. Have you ever been tempted to gain a competitive advantage by breaking the rules? If so, what happened? Did you find it easy or difficult to make that choice? How did you feel after the fact?
2. Read Matthew 4:1-11. What are some of the ways Jesus was tempted? What defense mechanisms did He use to ward off Satan’s temptations? How can you apply Jesus’ methods to your life?
3. Ward’s story of integrity gave her a greater platform to share her faith. In what ways can a lack of integrity impede a person’s opportunity to share the gospel with others?
4. What do you think Ward means when she says she plays “for an audience of One”? How does buying into that belief make a difference when it comes to making difficult choices that might affect integrity? How might living life for that “audience of One” relieve some of the pressures to conform to society’s lackadaisical attitude towards integrity?
5. Read Acts 24:16. What do you think it means to “have a clear conscience toward God and men”? Can you describe the difference between having a clear conscience versus a guilty conscience? What might be some of the benefits of having a clear conscience? What things do you do in order to maintain a clear conscience?

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Bible Reference:

Acts 24



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